

# Interview: From pots and pans to tabla

**Julia Gualtieri**

Lyal Sunga is a natural talent. Ever since he was a young boy he has had tremendous inclination for banging on things, whether they be pots and pans or his desk at school.

Nowadays, Sunga is a political science and philosophy major at Carleton, with an interest in science and aspirations for a career in law. But there is another side

to Sunga as well. For the past nine years or so, Sunga has been playing tabla, a type of drum originating in the East. Sunga's tabla comes from India, and consists of two drums, a large bass drum called a banya, and a narrow smaller drum called a tabla. The drums are usually played sitting cross-legged on the floor.

The sound of the tabla is unique — a rhythmic blend of rippling notes, at times haunting, at times mesmerizing. The form of music is centuries old and is deeply rooted in Indian culture.

Indian music plays a great part in religion. No Indian religious festival is complete without the hypnotic beat of the tabla played in accompaniment with other instruments. While he said he is not an expert, Sunda said the music of India is believed to have originated from Sanskrit myths in the South of India. The musical forms were passed from generation to generation until gradually they became formalized into strict systems of music.

There is a basic division in Indian music between classical and folk music, which reflect the diversity of Indian culture. Within the classical style there

are two further subdivisions based on geographical boundaries between the North and the South. The Southern style is rigid; the Northern classical style is more improvisational and is best exemplified by the music of Ravi Shankar.

Sunga said that a parallel can be drawn between Indian classical music and Western jazz. He said Indian music relies heavily on improvisation or on "creating on a theme" as in the *raga*, a melodic form typical of the Northern classical style. Sunga said there are different ragas for different times of day, seasons, emotions and deities. The more proficient the musician, the better he/she is able to improvise.

According to Sunga, there are many reasons why Indian music may sound "incomprehensible" to Westerners. He said one major factor is the sheer complexity of the rhythmic cycles. The other factor is that there are fine distinctions between notes (or microtones as they are called), which allows for a greater gradation of tones.

Sunga often plays a sort of semi-classical style. When you hear him play, it is difficult to imagine that he is

completely self-taught. He had musical training in cello and piano when he was younger, but he has had only a few formal lessons on the tabla. Sunga doesn't like "rigid rules" but prefers to be "innovative on his own".

But he still respects formal training, and wants very much to go to India to study with the great tabla masters and to be able to assimilate the natural talent of his hands with the proper, formal techniques.

Sunga insists he is by no means at a professional level. "My technique is poor, and I would never be accepted in the professional world as I am now," he said. "I am not being modest, just honest."

Nevertheless, Sunga is asked to perform a few times each month, usually with other musicians. He does this on a volunteer basis, refusing payment but gaining "self-fulfillment" through his music. Most recently he appeared on the soundtrack of a *NFB* film, *A Sense of Family*. Sunga said this was an enriching experience, as it gave him the opportunity to play with professional musicians and a multitude of instruments.